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THE MEN WHO MADE ISRAEL

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MOSES AND THE BEGINNINGS OF ISRAEL

19. Israel's traditions have much to tell us of the descendants of Abraham. Isaac's sons were Esau and Jacob. The former was the ancestor of the Edomites who settled down on the heights south of the Dead Sea and formed a nation with which Israel had much to do afterward. Although the elder son, he was outwitted by Jacob, who obtained the birthright and his father's blessing by a series of clever tricks which the people of later days loved to hear told. Jacob, however, had to flee from the wrath of his brother, and went back to northern Mesopotamia, where his Aramean relatives lived. There he was received by Laban, who, with a craft almost equal to his own, succeeded in marrying him to his ill-favored daughter, Leah, before giving him the younger and beautiful Rachel whom he loved. After years of service and rich in possessions, Jacob returned to Palestine. His name was changed from Jacob to Israel, the name by which the nation that sprang from him was called. He was reconciled to his brother. He had twelve sons, who became the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. These were Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin.¹

20. Of all the stories that were told about these sons, that of Joseph was the fullest and most romantic. The favorite of his father, he was hated by his elder brothers. They got rid of him by selling him to some wandering merchants and reporting to his father that he had been killed by a wild beast. The merchants carried him into Egypt and sold him as a slave there. By his cleverness and uprightness, aided by an extraordinary series of events in which the

¹ Of these sons, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun were children of Leah; Joseph and Benjamin, of Rachel; while the others were born to their handmaidens, Zilpah and Bilhah.

narrators saw the hand of Jehovah, he rose from slavery to be the chief minister of the king of Egypt. Meanwhile a severe famine in Palestine drove his brethren to seek food in Egypt, and thus brought them face to face with him again. Finally they migrated into Egypt with their father. Joseph secured for them a district on the north-eastern border, called Goshen, where they pastured their flocks in the old nomadic fashion, and lived for many years in peace and prosperity.

21. It is possible only in the most general way to tell when these events took place. Certainly Egypt was a land old in history and civilization when these tribes entered it. It is at least probable that their coming was connected with the migration into Egypt of Semites who conquered the land under the leadership of the Hyksos, or Shepherd Princes. Even the date of their invasion and the length of their stay are uncertain. Certainly it is more likely that such a career as that of Joseph was run under Semitic foreign princes who came from the east. As they fell into the ways of living and ruling so long practiced by Egyptians before them, so the tribes which made up Israel now came more closely than ever before into relations with the ancient Egyptian civilization. This must have been especially true of Joseph and his house, who were prominent in the political life. This fact may explain why in the years that followed the descendants of Joseph played so great a part in Israel's history. The other tribes in Goshen, living their shepherd life, would be much less affected by such civilizing influences. The time was not long in coming, however, when all of them would face the critical question whether they would be drawn more closely into the circle of Egyptian life and be swallowed up in the undistinguished mass of peoples that made up the Egyptian state.

22. This critical period began with the expelling of the Hyksos from Egypt by the native Egyptians, led by the princes of Thebes (about 1600 B.C.). These princes became rulers of Egypt, and led their armies out to the conquest of Palestine and Syria as far as the Euphrates. They, the Pharaohs of the Eighteenth Dynasty, founded the Egyptian empire of the sixteenth and fifteenth centuries (1600-1400 B.C.), when Egypt was the great power of the eastern world. Toward the close of this period her grip on Syria was

weakened, owing to the advance of the Hittites from the northern mountains and the migration of the Aramean Semites from Arabia. In the fourteenth century, under the Nineteenth Dynasty Pharaohs, her empire was limited to Palestine. Among these kings the greatest was Ramses II (1324-1258 B. C.), who fought desperately with the Hittites, but was at last forced to make a treaty with them by which Syria from the Lebanon Mountains northward was yielded to the Hittites. After this he devoted himself to the strengthening of what remained to him. Under him cities were built, magnificent temples reared, and great activity in art and literature prevailed in Egypt. The court was splendid and the priesthood very powerful.

Just what happened to the forefathers of Israel during these centuries is not very clear. It may be that some were swept back into Palestine when the Hyksos were driven out. Perhaps some did not go down into Egypt at all, as their names are found on the lists of places and peoples of Palestine conquered by the Pharaohs of the Eighteenth Dynasty at a time when the Israelite traditions represent all to have been in Egypt. In a similar list of Palestinian peoples on an inscription of the Pharaoh Meremptah, the successor of Ramses II of the Nineteenth Dynasty, occurs the first mention of Israel: "Israel is desolated: his grain is not." This suggests that Israel was in Palestine at that time. There can be no doubt, however, that a part, and the most important part, of those tribes which were soon to form the nation remained in Egypt.

23. The effect of Egyptian ascendancy in the eastern world would be to bring these tribes more immediately under Egyptian control. The Israelite tradition tells of a new king arising "who knew not Joseph," and who proposed to use Israel to build his cities and palaces. It is probable that this Pharaoh was Ramses II, and his design in this was to reduce them to complete subjection to Egyptian rule, and thus speedily to absorb them into Egyptian life. They were by this means brought to the verge of extinction when Jehovah raised up a leader and deliverer for them in the person of Moses.

24. As was the case with Joseph, romantic stories were told of the early life of Moses. Among other means used to weaken the tribes, the Pharaoh commanded that all male children born to them

should be thrown into the Nile. Moses' mother hid him as long as she could, then set him afloat on the Nile in a boat of reeds, and sent her daughter to watch its course. The boat grounded on the shore at a place where the Pharaoh's daughter found him, and took him to the palace, where he was brought up as a prince of the realm, learned in all the wisdom of Egypt. But he remained an Israelite at heart, and even slew an Egyptian whom he saw beating one of his countrymen. Fearful of the consequences of his deed, he fled into the Arabian desert, where he was received into a tribe of Midian, married the daughter of the chief, and lived many years in exile among them.

25. Meanwhile the Egyptian oppressor died, and another Pharaoh was on the throne. This was the opportunity for an attempt to deliver the tribes from Egyptian bondage, and Jehovah summoned Moses to this task. The exile saw a wonderful vision of a bush burning with fire, yet not consumed, and heard Jehovah's voice out of the midst of it calling him to return and lead his brethren out of bondage. In carrying out this work the problem he had to solve was twofold. He had to convince his countrymen that the time was come to strike for freedom, and the Pharaoh had to be forced to let the people go. His people had not forgotten that their forefathers had trusted in Jehovah, and the promise of deliverance roused them to new faith in him. Then, aided by his elder brother, Aaron, Moses demanded the release of the people. The Pharaoh at first refused, but at the word of Moses a tremendous series of plagues culminating in the death of every first-born son was brought upon Egypt by the power of Jehovah. Then only did the king give his word to let them go. Under the leadership of Moses the whole body started for the eastern desert, when suddenly the king changed his mind and sent an army after them to bring them back. But Jehovah was true to his promise. A pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night moved before them to point out their way, until they came to a halt before an arm of the Red Sea, with the Egyptian army behind them. Then at the bidding of Moses a strong wind sprang up, which blew back the shallow waters until a path was made, over which they passed to the other side. The army of Pharaoh followed and attacked them as they were coming out.

In the midst of the conflict the wind suddenly changed, the waters returned, and the Egyptians perished in the sea. Thus the word of Jehovah was accomplished and the people was delivered, as Moses had said.

26. This exodus from Egypt, culminating in so wonderful a deliverance made a deep impression upon Israel's life. Fathers told it to their children. It was handed down from generation to generation with a variety of details, which, as time went on, ever enlarged upon the mighty power of Jehovah. Some told how the waters rose up like a high wall on either side of the advancing host. The number of those who went out from Egypt was thought to be a million or more, and the pursuing army was made up of the entire fighting force of Egypt. Moses was said to carry a magic rod by which he wielded the might of Jehovah; when he cast it on the ground, it became a serpent; when he held it out, darkness fell at his word, and the waters of the sea went and came. Of all the strokes that fell on the land of Egypt at Moses' word not one smote Israel. From the crowning blow of the death of the first-born they were saved by slaying a lamb and smearing its blood on the door-posts of their houses—an act which ever afterward was done year by year, and called the Passover sacrifice in remembrance of the event, because the angel of Jehovah passed over the houses of Israel.

27. At the heart of all these stories were three vital facts which sum up the real meaning of this thrilling experience. These were that the people were free, that Jehovah had freed them, and that this freedom was gained under the leadership of Moses. The first of these facts affected the later history of Israel as the origin of our own nation in rebellion from England has affected us. It gave them a sense of independence and a hatred of tyranny, which flamed out again and again in opposition to foreign rule and the exercise of arbitrary power at home. It raised up leaders who, inspired by the backward look at this stirring event, revived the people and called them to battle for their ancient liberty. The second fact made Jehovah the national god in a peculiar sense, and rooted their liberties in the sacred soil of religion. Henceforth the champions of Israel's freedom were men of God. The third fact put Moses at the head of affairs, gave him the complete confidence of the freed people, and

thus granted him the opportunity of creating a nation inspired with his own lofty ideals.

28. How he did his work Israel's traditions tell us in a series of wonderful narratives. The order of events and their details are difficult to follow, but the meaning of the whole is clear. A nation was created, with institutions civil and religious, and set to work in the world. Moses led the people through the desert to a lofty mountain region called Sinai, commonly thought to lie between the two northern arms of the Red Sea. There, amid scenes of unparalleled sublimity, in thunderings and lightnings, Jehovah and the people made an agreement. The new nation took Jehovah to be their god; Jehovah accepted the nation as his people, and through Moses gave them laws and institutions. We are told how Moses went up on to the Mount, and abode forty days and nights with Jehovah, receiving his commands for the people; and how, on his return, he made these known to the waiting multitude, who solemnly accepted them; how a tent was set up near the camp, where Jehovah came down to meet with Moses as the people's representative and to speak still further with them. Thus Israel's religion was born, and its charter was the free-will agreement, or covenant, which took form in the Decalogue, or Ten Words, written with the finger of God on tables of stone and placed in a chest, the ark, the symbol of his presence.

29. Then Moses led them out again into the desert with the purpose of going into the old home in Palestine. They came to Kadesh, a place of springs, just south of the border of Palestine. But, instead of advancing into the Promised Land, they remained there for forty years. About this period the traditions tell us next to nothing. They ascribe this stay to the disobedience of the people, and the consequent anger of Jehovah who condemned them to abide in the desert. Spies had been sent out from Kadesh into Palestine. All but one of them, on coming back, reported that the people of the land were too strong for them. The people grew faint-hearted, and even wanted to return to Egypt. This distrust of Jehovah's power brought on his punishment, and, when the people recovered courage and proceeded to advance into Canaan, they were defeated with severe loss, for Jehovah was not with them.

30. This affair illustrates the difficulties under which Moses labored in the training of the new nation. Intoxicated with their freedom, they were unwilling to submit to the discipline of national life. They imagined that Jehovah's care for them was an assurance that no troubles would befall them. Disappointed in these things, their anger concentrated on Moses. They resented his authority and sought to shake it off. Even his own relatives conspired against him. They murmured against Jehovah when food and water failed, and compared the scanty fare of the desert with the flesh-pots of Egypt. Even under the shadow of Sinai they turned to worship a golden calf.

31. But all the while Moses went steadily on with their training. He inspired them with a respect for national justice and law. Each clan and tribe had its chief by whom its rude justice was administered according to ancient customs. But now above these petty chiefs stood the common leader, Moses, and questions affecting the common weal were brought to him for decision. To aid him in this administration of justice, he appointed a body of judges, who heard cases and decided according to principles which Moses laid down. Thus a new law grew up which superseded the old custom.

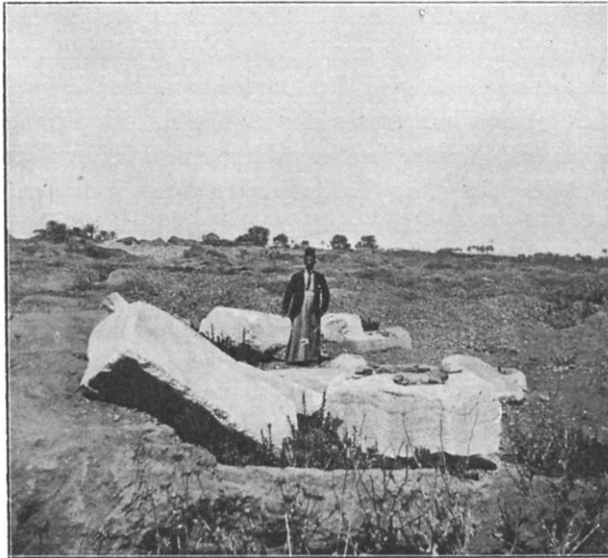
32. Thus Moses created Israel's law. In later times, as Israel grew in years and experience and new laws were needed, men thought of the beginning under Moses and traced the whole process back to him. Thus the Old Testament books, which describe the Mosaic age, ascribe to him the whole body of Israel's law, and represent him as laying down these precepts during the years of the desert life. While it is evident that the bulk of it belongs to later ages, they were right in making him its author in the sense that he first planted the seed; he was its founder, since in the creation of the nation he was the one who gave to Israel its earliest institutions and laid deep in the national heart the respect for justice. He is in very truth, therefore, Israel's lawgiver.

33. Moses was also the founder of Israel's religion. Under his guidance the clans accepted Jehovah as the god of the new nation at Sinai. His will, revealed through Moses, was made the law of the nation's life. One of the narratives embodied in the Book of Exodus even declares that Moses was the first to bring to the people

in Egypt the very name, Jehovah, under which they henceforth knew their God. "By my name Jehovah I was not known unto" the fathers. It is thought by some that the name was that of the god of the Kenites, a tribe of Midian among whom Moses had sojourned. Be that as it may, the idea it contained was the important thing. The name suggests the phrase "I will be," and conveys the thought that Jehovah will show himself to be the nation's god in the experiences of its history. It is a call to faith in God, like that which Abraham obeyed, and its acceptance stamps Israel as a people which looks forward to a future that God will prepare for it. Already that promise had been fulfilled in the exodus, where Jehovah showed himself Israel's savior. Later generations were wont to look back to that event as a wonderful proof of the character of their God. This Jehovah, who will show what he is in Israel's history, Moses also revealed as a god of justice. The lawgiver pronounced his decisions in the name of Jehovah, and the law which he imposed upon the nation he established as Jehovah's law. From that time forth in Israel every injustice was a sin against Jehovah, and every advance in righteousness had his approval. Good men everywhere could hope for his favor, and in their striving after justice and right might count on his help. Such a God Moses made known to Israel, and such a God Israel freely accepted. Thereby the nation took a unique place among the nations of the earth. Though it might stumble and fall, it could never utterly forget the choice it had made, or the destiny which that choice opened up before it in the future. This was the work of Moses for Israel.

34. At last the period of training was past, and the nation under Moses again set out for the Promised Land. This time the march was to the east, around the foot of the Dead Sea out in the eastern desert on the borders of Edom and Moab. On the northern border of Moab, at the river Anon, they turned westward toward the Dead Sea and the Jordan River. This region, occupied by an Amorite-Canaanite kingdom, was overrun, and the Amorite king, Sihon, was killed. The tradition tells us that King Og of Bashan, the land lying just north of Sihon's kingdom, was conquered at the same time. The way across the Jordan into western Palestine lay open. But Moses was not to lead them into Canaan. He had fallen under

the displeasure of Jehovah, for some reason that the traditions do not make altogether clear, and was forbidden to enter the land. His last days are full of solemn majesty. The story was told that after admonishing the people and blessing them, he ascended to the top of Mount Nebo, on the eastern border of the sea, and from its lofty top looked westward and northward over the valleys and plateaus where his people were to dwell. There he died and there his servant Joshua buried him. "No man knoweth of his sepulchre." His monument is the nation Israel which he created, and whose descendants revere his memory unto this day.



GENERAL VIEW OF THE LAND OF GOSHEN